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ABSTRACT

A survey of 239 newspapers was conducted to explore the use of writing coach programs at these papers. The coaches' backgrounds, newsroom factors, specific writing problems, budgetary considerations, and implications for journalism education were all explored, as were the perceptions of editors supervising the writing coaches. Of the 239 papers completing the survey, 77 indicated they had or have had someone to help improve the writing of reporters. Of the 77, 30 said they had persons who were on the editorial staff, and 7 of these indicated that the person did nothing else but coach writing. The papers that did not have coaches gave budgetary restraints as the main reason. Of the 30 coaches, 25 had degrees in either journalism or English, 23 reported having been reporters on daily newspapers, and 25 said they had editing experience ranging from zero to 25 years. Eight papers assigned reporters to the coaches, nine let the reporter seek out the coach for help, three did all writing coach work in group sessions, and ten used a combination of these approaches. The most serious problem for reporters was not having organized their time and thoughts before writing. The most prevalent mechanical problems were wordiness, jargon, and lack of story flow. Lack of communication between editors and reporters about stories was the highest ranked newsroom problem. (HTH)

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NEWSPAPER DIVISION

AN ANALYSIS OF WRITING COACH PROGRAMS ON AMERICAN DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF WRITING COACH PROGRAMS ON AMERICAN DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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This is a survey of daily newspapers of more than 25,000 circulation which have, or have had, writing coach programs. Of the 485 newspapers in this circulation category, some 30 currently have an active writing coach program, and another 47 have had programs of one type or another in the recent past. Some 80 persons who have served as writing coaches were identified.

The study found the most serious problem for reporters was lack of organizing time and thoughts before writing. The most prevalent mechanical problems were wordiness, jargon and lack of story flow. The problem with the highest rating among newsroom-related situations was lack of communication between editors and reporters about stories. The coaches themselves were about evenly divided between journalism and English backgrounds, and averaged 6 years reporting and 14 years editing experience.

Although editors have usually been the persons in the newsroom to suggest ways for reporters to improve their stories, a specialist has been introduced to American newspapers in recent years.

This is the person known as the writing coach, simply defined as a person whose full- or part-time responsibility is to assist reporters in improving the style and/or content of their news stories.

Thomas Winship, recently retired editor of The Boston Globe, says the current writing coach movement started with a conversation at an American Society of Newspaper Editors' convention in Honolulu in 1977.

As he remembers it, Tim Hays of the Riverside (Cal.) Press-Enterprise, during a session devoted to the ills of the newspaper, suggested "Why don't we as editors, do what we are best equipped to do -- improve the quality of writing in our newspapers? It seems to me brighter and more interesting stories are the ultimate key to boosting circulation."[1]

Winship says that when Gene Patterson of the St. Petersburg Times took over the presidency of the ASNE a short time later, "he set out to identify as a major problem the desperate need to improve the quality of writing in American newspapers. Patterson hired Roy Peter Clark, perhaps the best known of the writing coaches, and set in motion an annual contest to find and recognize the finest writing in American newspapers.

In the next several years, several newspapers hired persons to help improve the level of writing on their newspapers.

Reports from subsequent professional meetings, published in the trade press, indicated the subject of writing coaches continued to draw interest, but no organized study of the phenomenon had been conducted. With the financial support of the Gannett Newspaper Foundation and Bowling Green State University, funds were provided and such a study was undertaken.

Results were compiled by early 1984 and a follow-up survey to identify additional coaches was conducted in late 1984.

METHODOLOGY

A number of articles in reports from the Associated Press Managing Editors meetings and the American Society of Newspaper Editors meetings were reviewed. Opinions expressed in these articles were recorded. Additional questions were added from the researcher's classroom teaching experience.

A field test to the state of Florida was conducted, wherein several of the coaches in that state and another who was visiting that state were interviewed. The questions were asked of these coaches, some were added, and others were dropped.

At this time, it was decided the following areas would be investigated:

-- The background of the coaches, their professional and educational experience, and the nature and types of newsroom and non-newsroom activities they had taken part in;

-- Newsroom factors, such as program organization, possible tensions between coaches and established editors, reasons other papers were not starting writing coach programs, and ways in which the instruction was carried out;

-- Specific writing problems, an area of interest to journalism education;

-- Specific grammar problems, since many editors had expressed a concern about proficiency in grammar by entry-level students;

-- Implications for journalism education;

-- Budgetary considerations, i.e., salary levels of the coaches and costs of programs. (Since very few of the participants answered this section of the study, it was dropped from the report.)

-- And, finally, a separate survey of editors supervising the writing coaches was mailed out to determine their perceptions of the success of the programs.

Since the writing coach movement was considered one which carried more than just a little cost, it was assumed that smaller newspapers with few reporters would not consider it financially feasible.

Therefore, all papers with less than 25,000 circulation were not included in the study.

In all, 485 papers were included in the study and 239 of them returned the survey form for a 49 per cent return.

From information received in the original run of the survey, a separate program evaluation form was mailed to 70 editors, of whom 46 returned their survey for a 65.7 per cent return.

The high rate of return can be attributed to high levels of personal involvement with the program and the fact that results of the study were sent to all who requested them. Due to the newness of the program, many editors and coaches were interested in learning as much as they could about their counterparts offering similar programs.

RESULTS

Of the 239 papers returning survey forms, 77 newspapers indicated they had, or have had in the past on occasion, someone to help improve the writing. Of those 77, 30 papers said they had persons who were on the newspaper editorial staff and seven of these indicated that person did nothing else but writing coach work.

Of the ones who did not have a person on staff, most had brought in an outside consultant, a coach from another paper, or a college professor for workshops of varying lengths.

There is little to add perspective to the fact that 77 papers of 239 have seen the need to do something about writing improvement. This is a benchmark report, and it should be noted that other papers have added coaches since that time. In February, 1985, the Morris Communications Inc. group, based in Augusta, Ga., announced it may have become the first group of newspapers to hire a coach for each of the 11 papers in the group.

Those papers which did not have coaches gave budgetary reasons as the main cause (90 of 246 negative responses cited this factor). A large number (77) of editors checked an answer marked "Writing improvement is the responsibility of the editors" and 38 others said that even if budgets were better they would have to hire more reporters before any coaches. A number of editors did not complete all options in many parts of this study, despite the fact that questions were made as brief as possible.

Writing Coach Profile:

(Please note that in most of the following categories, some respondents failed to answer certain questions. Totals do not add up in most of the categories by one or two items.)

As indicated, 30 persons said they had coaches on staff.

Of these, 25 had degrees in either Journalism or English. Eight had Journalism major, seven majored in English. Three had journalism as part of a double major, and seven had English as part of a double major.

Therefore, 25 of the 30 had either Journalism-related or English-related degrees. Other majors included history, political science, geology and other fields not given.

In terms of reporting experience, 23 reported they had been reporters on daily newspapers for an average of 5.9 years, range of zero to 25 years experience. Five said they had never been a newspaper reporter.

In editing experience, 25 of the 30 said they had experience ranging from no experience (two persons) to 25 years, and averaging 14.3 years.

People who served as consultants to newspapers, conducting occasional writing workshops, were included in the above figures.

Newspapers with writing coaches average 152,000 circulation, although this could be a misleading average. In terms of circulation categories, it broke down as follows: One paper less than 20,000 (obtained through a referral from a participating coach); nine with circulations between 25,000 and 50,000; four from 50,000 to 100,000; and nine more than 100,000 circulation.

This would clearly not be a phenomenon limited to certain circulation categories, either large or small.

Program Outlines:

In the pre-test, it seemed clear that there was no one organization of a writing coach program that was going to be dominant. This was borne out by the survey.

Eight papers assign reporters to coaches, nine let the reporter seek out the coach for help, three do all writing coach work in group sessions, and 10 use a combination of these approaches.

Coaches are very sensitive to reporters' self images, making corrections as necessary but being careful to be as positive as possible in their comments. Coaches in the pre-test said with all of the other pressures of dealing with sources and meeting deadlines, the coach could provide an oasis of calm and time for reflection otherwise not possible.

Six of the coaches were in the regular editorial chain of command at the newspaper, 22 were not. Those who were outside the chain of command found it easier to deal with reporters they would not have to assess for promotions or raises at some time in the future.

About half of the coaches (14) said they spent some time listening to personal problems of reporters in hopes of solving the problems and making it easier to concentrate on work. One person said he spent half of his time in the building talking about personal problems of reporters, others said the time ranged from a few minutes to an hour or two per week.

Seven of the coaches (all of the full-time coaches) said they had regular in-house newsletters based on the New York Times "Winners and Sinners" format. Of the seven full-time coaches, five ran weekly critique sessions, five brought in lecturers and guest speakers, and five arranged for reporters to attend out-of-town seminars.

Of the 23 who were not full-time coaches, nine did newsletters, eight did weekly critiques, three provided outside lecturers and speakers, and one helped staff members find out-of-town seminar possibilities.

Eighteen of the 30 coaches said they felt most newsroom editors had so many other responsibilities that writing improvement either did not get done or was shunted to the side. The other five disagreed, saying they felt editors had enough time to do it, if they were interested.

Sixteen of the coaches said their papers were 100 per cent in support of their programs, six said 50 per cent, and two said 25 per cent.

Twenty said their papers had ways (bulletin boards, newsletters, special queues in the computers) for bringing good writing to the attention of the staff, six said they did not.

During the pre-test, one managing editor said he had stopped his writing coach program because he felt it would present jurisdictional problems (not legal, union jurisdictions) between newsroom editors and the writing coach. This was not borne out in the full study.

None of the coaches felt this was a major problem, three said it might develop into a problem, four said it was a problem which had been resolved, and 16 said it had never been a problem. The role of management in the writing coach establishment and how it is presented to the staff are apparently keys to whether this movement is accepted or not.

When asked if they considered their own programs successful, 24 of 25 coaches said yes. One wrote in "50-50."

More of the coaches felt the programs had the greatest impact on the best writers (10), than on average writers (6), poor writers (1) and five said they could not tell. Greater interest by better writers was a key.

Twenty of the 21 who answered the question said they felt newspaper writing could be improved if enough resources were devoted to the problem. This was in response to one of the pre-test comments by an editor who said he would hire a writing coach immediately if he thought it would do any good. The coaches also felt (21-4) that one person could have a significant impact on the writing level of the newspaper staff.

In response to the USA TODAY newspaper getting heavy publicity at the time, a question was asked relative to story length. Seven papers indicated they had a story length limit, 17 said they did not. The limits ranged from 12 to 20 inches and averaged 18.5 inches.

Other questions included the following, listed here in interests of saving space:

Do you work with reporters before they turn in stories(3), primarily on deadline (1), after stories have been turned in (14) or at various times during the news cycle (7).

Do you have a formal written outline of your program (6) or a handshake only (19)?

Do you have a financial rewards program for excellent writing? Yes (8) No (18). If Yes, does the financial reward help improve writing? Yes (2) No (5).

Is your critique focused on writing (18), reporting (2) or both (2).

Do you ever accompany reporters on assignments to watch their reporting teachniques (a factor brought up in the pre-test)? Yes (4) No (24).

(Asked of consultants) Do you feel there is enough follow-up after you leave? Yes (4) No (9).

Do you believe the writing coach movement is growing (16) standing still (4) or declining (1)?

Specific Writing Problems:

A list of writing problems common to reporters was developed from several sources. These included trade magazine articles on writing, conversations with other writing instructors, and personal teaching experience. This list of problems was discussed with coaches during the field test, and additional items were added.

The coaches were then asked to rate the problems as (a) a serious problem for many reporters, giving it a score of 3; (b) a serious problem for some reporters, scoring it 2; an occasional problem for some reporters, scoring it 1; or a problem which does not occur on the newspaper being studied, score of 0. Due to the basic nature of the ratings, no statistical analysis was possible.

The five writing problems which drew the highest scoring from the coaches were as follows:

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Reporters don't organize their material before they start writing, 2.27; reporters don't spend enough time thinking before they start writing, 2.11; reporters don't read copy carefully before they turn it in, 2.07; reporters don't have an ear for the language, so their copy lacks life, 2.07; reporters write too many procedural stories (government did this) and too few people stories(illustrating what government did with a family or personal example), 2.03.

Closely grouped after these five were three items rated 1.97 down to 1.93; reporters don't read enough, so they don't appreciate good writing, 1.97; reporters don't rewrite enough because they don't have enough time, 1.96; and reporters don't rewrite because they don't think it will improve their copy, 1.93.

The three problems with the lowest totals were as follows: bright writing is too much to expect on deadline, 1.22; extra coding required on VDTs causes delays and stress, .92; and reporters freeze on deadline, .91.

A section of the survey also attempted to analyze whether there were factors in the newsroom, i.e., reporter-editor relationships, which caused tensions or problems in the writing situation. The same scoring system was used as in the previous section.

TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE

The problem with the highest scoring was a lack of discussion between copy editors and reporters on stories, given a score of 2.31.

Also scoring above 2.0, indicating these problems were considered serious for more than just a few writers, were the following:

Beginning reporters want more help than they get from editors, 2.17;

Copy editors and reporters are not in the building at the same time, can't discuss problems with stories, 2.12;

Editors don't take enough time pointing out problems, 2.07;

There is not enough discussion between reporters and assignment editors, 2.07; and

Copy editors are concerned only with grammar and spelling, not flair and style, 2.04.

The two least important problems in this section were reporters don't notice when their copy is changed, 1.33, and reporters have no encouragement to write better stories, 1.04.

An effort was also made to attempt to identify the specific mechanical and grammatical problems which gave reporters the most difficulty, in the view of the coaches. The items and their scores were as follows:

Wordiness, 2.46; story flow or smoothness, 2.32; jargon, 2.20; lack of detail, 2.11; weak transition, 2.11; passive voice rather than active, 2.07; poor grammar, 2.07; cliches, 2.00; lack of attempts to vary sentence length for variety, 1.92; poor spelling, 1.88; accuracy, 1.74; lack of verb-noun agreement, 1.66; attribution problems, 1.66; and sexist language, 1.25.

Supervising Editors' Responses:

This was the separate mailing and separate survey mailed out to the 46 editors identified as being in charge of the writing coaches who completed that section of the report. It should be remembered that these persons were the ones who had hired the writing coaches and were thus in a position

of being asked to analyze a program they were already committed to.

But even with this, the unanimity of support was very high.

TABLE THREE ABOUT HERE

Of the 39 supervising editors who answered the question, 38 felt newspaper writing was in serious need of improvement.

Thirty-two of 35 felt one person could significantly improve the level of writing on a newspaper, and 39 of 44 said they had experienced no tensions between coaches and other editors.

Twenty of 30 felt writing programs in journalism schools were NOT sufficient to meet the needs of beginning reporters, and 33 of 37 felt the writing coach program was a necessity and not a luxury.

When given an open-ended question about the best thing related to the writing coach program, the following answers were provided by editors: one-on-one teaching ratio, heightened awareness of needs in writing, showing that a newspaper cares about its reporters, and "it takes some of the heat off editors."

Answers to "What is the worst thing about writing coach programs" included cost (given 7 times), newsroom tensions (4), soft leads (2), problems of translating awareness of problems into improved writing, lack of funding for two coaches, no followup after one-shot workshops, and "it takes some of the heat off editors."

Implications for Journalism Education:

One theme was heard often in this section of the study -- writing coaches felt journalism education should involve more writing.

Twenty-five of 28 coaches felt recent graduates need and want more help on their writing, both in the classroom and the newsroom.

On grammar, the coaches split. Sixteen felt grammar and spelling were serious problems for recent graduates, 13 felt this was not a major problem.

As indicated earlier, many of the coaches had an English background. Eight coaches said they would recommend a journalism major to a student interessted in the field, four said they would recommend a journalism minor, and 11 said they would prefer a liberal arts degree coupled with an internship.

Nineteen of 27 coaches said they felt writing programs in journalism schools put too much emphasis on the inverted pyramid and not enough on other types of writing.

To keep things in perspective, the coaches agreed that some journalism programs were better than others. Twenty-two of 24 agreed with the following statement: It is impossible to lump journalism education into one picture because there are noticeable differences in preparation among the interviewees we get at our paper.

On one subject they were agreed, at least 25 of the 28 agreed. That was that journalism students should be required to take more literature courses in college.

DICUSSION:

The writing coach movement as a national phenomenon is relatively young, and many of its formative years were during a period of recession and tight budgets for newspapers.

Therefore, whether the writing coach movement is a "success" or not is not to be decided at this time. While the number of papers employing coaches is not large, the near-unanimity of feeling about the value of the programs must also be taken into consideration.

In recent months, as noted, the Morris Communications Group has added coaches for its newspapers. The number of announcements in the trade press about papers hiring coaches has dropped off, but hiring a coach may no longer be news in the normal definition.

But clearly, there are problems which this study discusses which need further analysis. If editors don't discuss stories and style with reporters, who will? If beginning students don't get enough writing in journalism education, and if they don't get enough critique from editors, how are they to learn? Certainly not in the secondary schools, because at the time this report was being compiled the Carnegie Commission issued a report suggesting no high school English teacher have more than two sections of 20 students each. Obviously, not enough writing is being done in the secondary schools.

Journalism education might benefit from an analysis of its writing programs based on the problems coaches feel are the most important -- organizing, rewriting, wordiness, jargon and the others listed. This

might provide a benchmark for further study.

It seems clear that coaches and supervising editors are pleased with their programs, which they have developed and supervised. But there is still the feeling by many editors that one person is not able to improve writing, and that this is still the responsibility of the regular editors.

It also seems clear that there is room for more communication between editors and reporters. But it is acknowledged that this is difficult, given the deadlines and production problems of most newspapers. With more papers switching to morning publication, the hours of reporters and copy editors no longer coincide on many papers, making conversation unlikely except in emergencies.

The mix between English and Journalism backgrounds of coaches is intriguing. Does the split mean supervising editors hire those with English backgrounds because they feel Journalism education has left a void? Does it mean they value style and grace as highly as meeting deadlines? And is there a verifiable link between taking more English courses and better writing?

The study does indicate there is a place for positive reinforcement for reporters, and a time to reflect over yesterday's story before rushing into the next deadline.

Clearly, there are many other angles of this program which could be studied with benefit to the profession.

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[1]"How to Improve the Quality of Writing in Your Newspaper," Thomas Winship, Eric W. Allen Memorial Lecture, Oregon Press Conference, University of Oregon, Eugene, Feb. 12, 1982. Offered May, 1982, presstime, ANPA.

TABLE ONE

SPECIFIC WRITING PROBLEMS

Scale is 3 = Serious problem for many reporters
2 = Serious problem for a few reporters
1 = Occasional problem for some reporters
0 = Problem which does not occur at your newspaper

2.17 -- Reporters do not organize their material enough before they start writing.
2.11 -- Reporters don't spend enough time thinking before they start writing.
2.07 -- Reporters don't read copy carefully before they turn it in.
2.07 -- Reporters don't have an ear for the language, so their copy lacks life.
2.03 -- Reporters write too many procedural stories (government did this) and not enough people stories.
1.97 -- Reporters don't read enough, so they don't appreciate good writing.
1.96 -- Reporters don't rewrite enough because they don't think it will improve copy.
1.93 -- Reporters don't rewrite enough because they don't have enough time.
1.93 -- Reporters don't look at stories as having a beginning, a middle, and an end.
1.85 -- Reporters don't watch for detail, so they can't use it in stories.
1.83 -- Most reporters write for editors, not for readers.
1.72 -- Reporters are not clear about story focus, therefore have lead problems.
1.66 -- Most leads and sentences are too long.
1.64 -- Reporters leave too many holes in stories.
1.48 -- Reporters procrastinate too much, leaving writing to the last minute.
1.48 -- Story length limits cause problems.
1.37 -- Reporters bury information in stories.
1.33 -- Reporting is more of a problem than writing is.
1.29 -- Jello journalism (long leads, too soft) is a problem.
1.28 -- There are too many characters in the average story, clogging it up.
1.24 -- Interviewing is more of a problem than reporting or writing.
1.22 -- Bright writing is too much to expect at deadline.
.93 -- Extra coading on VDTs causes problems and stresses.
.91 -- Reporters freeze on deadlines.

TABLE TWO

NEWSROOM FACTORS
(Same scale as Table One)

2.31 -- There is not enough discussion between reporters and copy editors on stories.
2.17 -- Beginning reporters want more help than they get from editors.
2.12 -- Copy editors and reporters are not in the building together when they need to be to discuss stories.
2.07 -- Editors don't take enough time with reporters to point out problems.
2.04 -- There is not enough discussion between reporters and assignment editors.
2.04 -- Copy editors are concerned only about grammar and spelling, not flair and style.
1.87 -- Reporters get "uptight" when editors change their copy.
1.85 -- Reporters complain "this paper doesn't have enough space for my stories."
1.85 -- Stories get in so late editors don't have a chance to give them a "good read."
1.77 -- Reporters suffer burnout because of deadlines and other problems.
1.77 -- Most reporters are better writers than they think they are.
1.66 -- Lines of communication are not really open between reporters and editors on various levels.
1.65 -- There is a condescending attitude toward reporters by copy editors.
1.63 -- Reporters are kept on one beat too long, and need to have new perspectives.
1.33 -- Reporters don't even notice it when editors change their copy.
1.04 -- Reporters have no encouragement or incentive to write better stories.

SUPERVISING EDITORS' RESPONSES
(Not all 46 editors answered every question.)

Do you believe newspaper writing is in serious need of improvement?
Yes -38; No - 1.
Do you believe hard news stories have to be shorter because newshole is shrinking? Yes 25, No 9.
Do you believe one person, such as a writing coach, can have a significant impact on the level of writing in a newspaper? Yes 32, No 3.
The writing coach program we have is very successful (9), moderately successful (28); caused more problems than it solved (1).
Which of the following criteria do you use to determine the value of your programs? Writing is noticeably better (29); Newsroom attitude seems to have improved (29); We are getting positive comments from our readers (8); Have fewer problems meeting deadlines (1).
In a period of tight budgets, a writing coach is a fringe we simply cannot budget for at this time. Agree (4), Disagree (33).
Writing coach programs tend to build tensions between editors and coaches. Yes (5), No (39).
I think writing programs in journalism schools are not sufficient to meet the needs of beginning reporters. Agree (20), Disagree (10).
Aspiring journalists should take more courses in the following areas: (Open-ended question, editors had to choose the courses) English 15, History 8, Economics 7, Political Science 5, many others with fewer than five responses.

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